

A cleaner Rouge? DNR: It's possible

By Teri Banas
staff writer

Someday, residents living along the murky Rouge River may be able to point to a clean resource.

But making it happen will take cooperation and commitment from the 35 communities that border the Rouge's three branches, along with a central coordinator to organize pollution cleanup activities, according to a state Department of Natural Resources official.

Using that formula, a state-led effort to make a clear, clean Rouge a reality is currently before the Michigan Water Resources Commission. Next month, the WRC is expected to finish plans for a DNR strategy to improve the river.

"In the past there was a lot of studying that took place before anything was done," said Roy Schrammek, DNR water quality specialist. "But the orientation of the new strategy presented to the commission is that there are a lot of things that can be done now."

THE STRATEGY would involve such measures as:

- Placing the DNR at the lead to direct improvements, limit remedies and coordinate the cleanup.
- Finding for permanent listing all the sewer lines and pipes that discharge into the river.
- Eliminating more than 180 combined sanitary/storm-sewer discharge points that dump raw sewage and industrial waste into the river during high water.

Schrammek is detailing a work plan for the cleanup. It will be presented to the WRC Sept. 19 in Delta Township, west of Lansing. WRC's seven members include representatives of the departments of Natural Resources, Agriculture, Public Health and Transportation. The main concern is water pollution, and it issues water discharge permits.

By the WRC's request, the plan will include a section detailing community involvement. Central to this new stat at cleaning the Rouge is community support and input in the 467-square-mile Rouge basin.

"It will be their (communities) responsibility to develop a correctional plan and submit it to the state to coordinate with other communities. Our (DNR's) role will be to coordinate," Schrammek said.

BUT SOME community spokesmen believe local involvement is needed even earlier — at the development stage.

Karen Gottlieb, executive director of the 19-community-member Rouge River Watershed Council, said she urged the WRC at its last meeting to seek community involvement in the developing strategy.

"My contention was you need to have the people who are implementing the plan in on developing it," she said. "You

can't just hand them a plan and expect it to be carried out."

Northville Township Supervisor Susan J. Heintz, who chairs the watershed council, agreed.

"They can't expect local communities to implement a state policy if they didn't have input," Heintz said.

For that reason, she said it was a good idea that the DNR established an advisory committee made up of Gottlieb and representatives from Wayne and Oakland counties, the Southeast Council of Governments (SEMCOG), the Detroit Water and Sewer Department and the DNR. (The committee is meeting for the second time today in SEMCOG's Detroit offices.) Both Gottlieb and Heintz called the strategy extremely broad in scope, though they agreed it is an important "first step."

THE ROUGE River is comprised of three branches that flow through southeastern Michigan into the Detroit River. Branches of the lower, middle and upper Rouge are found in parts of Wayne, Oakland and Washtenaw counties.

According to Schrammek, the state intends to develop a computerized model of the river basin to aid in correcting pollution problems.

"There are all kinds of uses for this model down the road," he said. "For instance, if there's a fish kill in Redford Township, we'll plug in the coordinates, and we'll be able to figure out what remedy would have the best impact."

Schrammek said federal support is being sought from a fund of the federal Clean Water Act, but negotiations haven't been concluded. He said the project, however, will need a combination of federal, state and local support.

THE DNR's action is far from the first study into the causes of pollution in the Rouge. Gottlieb said part of the problem has been that while "studies have been done, no one has come up with the impetus to do anything."

"Most of the focus has been on the Detroit sewage treatment plant and bringing it up to capacity. But now, there are other issues. The DNR has it as a top priority, so something has to be done," Gottlieb said.

Schrammek said less than half of discharges into the Rouge River are from combined sanitary/storm sewers overflows by the Detroit wastewater system. Discharges are evenly divided between storm water and sanitary sewer overflows. Industrial discharges account for a small portion.

The sewer pipes are designed so that during heavy rainfalls, wastewater in the pipes overflows into the river. But now wastewater is discharging even during dry times. Each year, sewers during 600 billion gallons of water into the Rouge River and its tributary rivers and creeks.

"The river has the ability to cleanse itself as long as you don't exceed that capacity," he said.



A drain pipe carries an unknown substance into the Middle Rouge River in western Wayne County.

Funds for inland lakes dry up

State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) officials fear water quality in Michigan's inland lakes and streams will be jeopardized if the department's 10-year-old Self-Help Program goes unfunded.

Self-help is designed to counter a major threat to the recreational value of Michigan's inland waters — eutrophication.

After Oct. 1, federal funding for the Self-Help Program expires. EUTROPHICATION is the word experts use to describe the gradual transition of a lake to a weedy, algae-covered marsh. The cause is the gradual enrichment of natural waters with plant nutrients such as phosphorus.

"The goal of every lake is to become a marsh. It's a natural aging process," said DNR inland water expert Howard Wandell.

He continued, "Man accelerates the process by nutrient loading with improperly treated waste water discharges and agricultural run-off."

Wandell contends that the best way to slow the eutrophication process is to get rid of nutrient loading sources. Finding those sources is the tough part. According to Wandell, the DNR Self-Help Program is one aid in the fight.

"THE INTENT of the Self-Help Program is to correct a long-term monitoring problem," says Dick Mikula, who heads the monitoring effort. "The state tries to monitor all lakes in Michigan but is not meeting that goal."

Mikula noted that over the last 10 years, 650 lakes of more than 50 acres in size have been sampled at least once. "The Self-Help Program provides a much needed means of monitoring water quality in a wider range of public and non-public lakes."

Under the program, lake property owners sample their own lakes on a yearly basis. Throughout the summer months, participants lake transparency readings of their lake using a DNR supplied Secchi disc. The readings are compiled by the water de-



our land

Penny Wright

partment and used as guidelines for evaluating changes in water quality.

ACCORDING to Mikula, the benefits of program participation are numerous:

- Major sources of nutrient loading can be identified.
- Both DNR and lake owners compile data on

the water quality of a given lake.

- The program brings lake owners into more contact with DNR.

"Communities in the program for several years will see trends," said Mikula. "More transparency (water clarity) means greater water quality. Decreasing transparency means declining water quality, and when this happens we try to seek causes."

Mikula believes unless the DNR remains involved with the program, lake owners will abandon monitoring efforts.

To obtain additional information about the Self-Help Program write to Dick Mikula, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Inland Lake Management Unit, P.O. Box 30028, Lansing 48909.

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